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ABSTRACT

Supporters of sex education curriculum see it as a way of keeping in step with the times and of coping with the undesirable side effects of the new morality. Opponents argue that such classes infringe both the right of individual privacy, and the American tradition of dealing with sex in religious and family settings. The implementation of sex education must involve the consideration of such mechanical aspects of education as definition, curriculum, staffing, finance, and evaluation. Sex has traditionally been an individual matter in this nation. There is no reason why the worldwide pattern of massive government intervention in private life should institutionalize this concern. Government, even at the school district level, is simply not equipped to deal with every subject or to solve every problem. The reassertion of the family and private organizations in this connection is not merely an option, it is a necessity. (Author/MLF)

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SEX EDUCATION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

A REEXAMINATION OF THE ISSUES

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Sex Education in the Public Schools:
A Reexamination of the Issues

Formal sex education in the public schools seems to be one of the 'danger zones' of American education. The comparatively short history of sex curricula has been laced with controversy. Both proponents and critics of such programs have been vehement and emotional in their arguments.

For decades, many of the points which comprise the sex education debate have been repeated with little modification. Yet this, as all debates, inevitably generates new insights and formulas. Periodic examination of topics such as this provides opportunity for summarization of the latest information on the subject, as well as the chance to develop new perspectives and conclusions.

The Debate

Ostensively, the controversy concerning sex education in the public schools matches practicality against principle. Supporters of such curricula see it as a means of keeping in step with the times and of coping with the undesirable side effects of the new morality. Opponents argue such classes infringe both the right of individual privacy, and the American tradition of dealing with sex in religious and family settings. Further analysis of each position promotes additional understanding of the subject.

Proponents in sex education stress history. They reason that sexual attitudes have changed drastically during the twentieth century, from the romantic "June-moon-spoon era of 1900"...to the "come-on-baby-light my fire bravado" of the late '60's. The National School Public Relations Association

points out that while the closeted environment of the turn of the century might have effectively dealt with sex within the home, the present age cannot afford to do so. Public media have become increasingly open in dealing with the topic, they note, and bringing young people into contact with the sexual environment at earlier ages.[1]

Advocates of sex curricula argue that many of the effects of these historical changes have been undesirable. They point to increasing numbers of teen age pregnancies and the rising incidence of venereal disease as proof that America seems to be encountering difficulty in dealing with 'sexual freedom'. They see increased openness regarding the topic as desirable, yet assert that breadth of thought must be accompanied by reason. They claim that the media's increasing emphasis on sex has created a sociological pattern, an historical movement destined to run its course. Present actions, these individuals reason, must focus on controlling the effects, rather than altering the direction, of the movement.[2]

The real issue , supporters of sex education emphasize, is information. Increased openness concerning sex has widened the range of sources through which young people learn about the subject. They note that misinformation of children concerning sex often creates undesirable social and emotional side effects. Many of these people refer to polls which indicate that students learn far more about sex from friends and media sources than from parents. They reason that this pattern is not difficult to understand, since many of today's parents were brought up "in an era when sex was still talked about in hushed tones or snickers".[3]

Under these circumstances, it is argued that the public schools should assume major responsibility for providing children with accurate information about sex. Proponents insist that through curricula dealing with this

subject, students could be introduced to human sexuality in the context of the wider range of human experience, rather than in the narrow limits of pornographic novels or streetcorner conversations. Responsible authorities, they contend, could give accurate information and provide reasoned answers to questions which might arise.[4]

Opponents of sex education as a curriculum take a different approach. They admit the development of increased openness regarding sexuality, during the twentieth century, yet attribute existing problems to an excess, rather than a misuse, of information on the subject. Critics such as Gary Allen have noted that, while no cause-effect relationship exists, the rise of the so-called 'new morality' has been paralleled by sizable increases in the incidence of venereal disease. Under these conditions, they imply, further efforts to distribute sexual information might be accompanied by still greater increases in societal problems.[5]

Both opponents and supports of sex education in the public schools see changes in morality as an historical pattern. Yet, while supporters of sex curricula attempt to cope with the movement's effects, critics have sought to alter its direction. Because their position is based on moral principle, rather than utilitarian practicality, many of these individuals have not been able to live with the effects of the sexual revolution. They have undertaken an assault on the movement itself.

Individuals of this persuasion question the value of sex education on ethical and practical grounds. From a moralistic standpoint, they argue that such programs place in public scrutiny, concerns traditionally reserved for the family. From a political perspective, they charge that dealing with sex in the public schools violates individual privacy. The development of sex education curricula, they contend, has had the practical effect of

weakening the moral fiber and strength of the national population.

The critics of sex education are unanimous in their conclusion that the public schools are not the place for such instruction. Many of these people propose that the ultimate responsibility for the dissemination of this knowledge be returned to the family. Others prefer that churches assume a larger role in this area. The consensus is that since sex is a private concern that it is best dealt with through non-public organizations.[6]

The debate over sex education thus pits practicality against morality and belief in the efficacy of public organizations against concern for the role of religion and the family. Yet in all of its facets, this confrontation has remained at the theoretical level. The adversaries have discussed abstractly the values of sex education curricula. The possibilities and probabilities of the impact of such curricula on society have been treated in like manner. The word practicality has appeared in this debate, but only in the context of the influence of these programs. The mechanical questions surrounding the implementation of sex curricula have been conveniently bipassed. This pattern of events has been most unfortunate. If one of us has a problem with his or her automobile, efforts are made to secure a mechanic who can fix the car, rather than the engineer who designed it. Yet, within the context of the controversy over sex education, few moves have been made in the direction of school 'technicians', the mechanics who fine tune and retool curricula and courses.

The Reality

Both supporters and opponents of sex education have made gestures in the direction of school personnel. Each group has gone to the trouble of procuring the services of educational 'experts' to back its positions.

The problem lies in the fact that these experts often end up sounding more like the philosophers who participate in the debate, than the people who shape programs at the ground level. Their points become encased in the rhetoric of combat, to the exclusion of technical information about the problem at hand.[7]

It must be realized that while the debate over sex education rages at the national level, the real battle over the issue will be fought out in local school districts. Despite all of the national controversy about the subject; despite the fact that the settings for this argument range from university halls to the United Nations, the final determination regarding the implementation of sex education programs rests with local school systems. In this context, the academic viability of curricula is often upstaged by the impact of such programs on school structures and community traditions. In this environment, the workability of sex education must ultimately be considereed.

One of the most basic issues surrounding any curriculum is definition. Before any program can be implemented, its range and limits must be fixed. This task is of special importance in the design of sex education curricula. Years of debate concerning the worth of sex instruction in the public schools have not produced a reasoned definition of this concept. In 1975, the World Health Organization defined such a program as a "broadly conceived effort which would deal not only with physiology but with interpersonal relationships and responsibility in reproductive behavior."[8] The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction defined sex education as "the learning about human sexuality and interpersonal relationships and roles within the family, as well as the imparting of information which assists individuals in understanding their feelings and making responsible choices".[9]

A number of existing curricula contain no definitions of the concept.[10]

Most available definitions of sex education seem to agree on the fact that the concept includes more than mere physiology. Instruction is designed to treat social as well as anatomical concepts. The North Carolina program, called one of the most comprehensive in the nation, also includes spiritual and religious considerations.[11] Almost all definitions suggest that sex curricula should span a number of disciplines. The number of areas included varies widely from program to program.

Experience indicates that definition is a most important aspect of initiating sex education in the community. Proponents of these programs argue that the only real controversy concerns what constitutes sound sex education.[12] Indeed!, if definition is the only problem, how can people be sure they are all talking about the same thing? Furthermore, how can the rest of an approach be sound if definition is the "only" problem? No sound pattern of instruction can evolve from such an uncertain base.

Beyond definition, curriculum development is probably the next crucial step in the assembly of sex education curricula. Instructional procedures must meet the needs which they are designed to fill. Experience has proven that hastily conceived efforts are often impossible to implement. As many definitions imply, sex education curricula are often multidisciplinary. Physiology has usually been the core of these programs. Extensive treatment of the reproductive systems both of humans and animals is usually deemed necessary to understanding of the nature of sex. The complexity of the biology which is dealt with seems to vary. Information about cell division, including mitosis and meiosis, is essential to the understanding of how human and animal offspring are produced, yet not all existing programs include it. Another important topic is the relationship between reproduction and such other

processes as respiration, digestion, and circulation. Again, however, curricula vary in their treatment of these linkages.[13]

Most sex education programs balance physiological and social subject material. The interpersonal component is usually drawn from home economics and sociology courses, with a strong admixture of overt, contemporary material on human roles and relationships. As in the case of biology and physiology, information about these areas varies widely in scope and depth. Home economics components range from data on family living to detailed consideration of birth processes. The field of group dynamics is presently rather ill-defined. It has included almost every other discipline which concerns relationships among humans. Its contributions to sex education usually include emphasis on male-female concerns in social and family settings.[14]

Sex education has occasionally been broadened to include other subject areas. Programs such as the one currently operating in North Carolina also take the spiritual dimension into account. This approach is particularly noteworthy, since it embraces emotional considerations which transcend mere individual consciousness. A related difficulty, according to some, lies in teaching the content without teaching morality. A number of authorities have contended that this is possible, but experience suggests the opposite.[15] Whenever sexual activity is discussed, a pattern of activity is suggested. Treatment of the topic from a directionless viewpoint is impossible.[16]

One area left out of most sex education curricula is the humanities. This omission seems strange. Some of the greatest literature ever written has emerged from male-female relationships. From such feelings have emerged Edgar Allen Poe's "Annabel Lee", the sonnets of Robert and Elizabeth

Barrett Browning, novels such as Wuthering Heights, and many of Shakespeare's plays. Music has also born the imprint of these feelings. Yet few sex education curricula even remotely deal with the poetic aspect of this subject. Indeed, the whole thrust of such curricula is the present. Aspects of human feeling has been all but ignored.

The interdisciplinary nature of sex education programs creates special difficulties for educators. Assembly of curricula requires extraction of materials from established courses of study. The product of these efforts has been unfortunate. The creation of sex education classes has brought about deemphasis of related materials in other courses. Biology has been left to the functioning of the organism, to the neglect of the continuation of the species. In less general curricula such as health, the arrival of sex education often severely limited the range of remaining material. Additionally, the interdisciplinary orientation of sex education means that the subject is not bound by traditional limits. As such, concerns treated tend to seep into areas even remotely connected to sex. The result can sometimes be a structureless curriculum, with discussions devoted to what students want to talk about than an objective program of study.

The disciplines which form public school curricula have often been patterned on college and university models. While departments of mathematics, English, and home economics abound in higher education, few programs concentrate on sex instruction. The evolution of an academic discipline can be a lengthy and complicated process. The public schools are hardly equipped to support such a development.

The methodology of the teaching of sex education suggests another curricular problem. Most established sex education programs span all or many of the existing school grade levels. Since sex education is interdisciplinary

in content, effective instruction demands presentations which balance social and physiological concerns at each grade level. While the design of efforts which increase the complexity of materials as grade levels rise is by no means easy in individual disciplines, it becomes extremely difficult in multi-subject areas. The fact that sex education often seems to be such an amorphous collection of areas adds to the intricacy of the situation.

While curriculum is a central aspect of any educational effort, another important concern is staffing. Not even the finest content will produce adequate results if it lacks an effective delivery system. A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the significance of obtaining effective teachers for sex education curricula. Authorities on the subject have asserted that sex instruction courses require individuals with wide qualifications. One source strongly recommended that such teachers have "certain personal qualifications such as the ability to empathize and establish rapport with children,to encourage frank and open discussion with the opportunity to express divergent views, and to demonstrate respect for a variety of values, as well as to have an adequate academic and informational background."[17] Other experts have recommended similar standards. Fred M. Hechinger suggested that the staff question is more important than the curricular one, with a premium being placed on teachers who "approach the subject with neither embarrassment nor sensationalism."[18]

The problem of staffing becomes even more difficult when one considers that comprehensive programs of teacher training in this area exist at few universities. At some colleges, the area is integrated in home economics departments. In others, it forms a part of science or social science program. Some universities have entirely separate programs. Because linkages to

established disciplines vary, training content also varies.[19] In some cases, school districts may literally have to shop for university programs which meet the definitions of their own curricula. It would be unreasonable to expect universities, which have not established sex education as a formal discipline, to be skilled in the training of teachers in this area.

The question of staffing a sex education curriculum is thus a two-fold one. A unique type of person is required, yet the varying quality of training programs make it likely that suitable individuals will obtain requisite instruction. All of this seems to suggest that, whatever the value of their case, supporters of sex education in the public schools may be jumping the gun. The universities do not seem sufficiently prepared to support such an effort. Perhaps more time for development might be in order. The call for individuals with special qualities is especially revealing. In no other discipline are such demands made. It seems that either the subject is too sensitive for the public schools in the first place, or the curricula are weak. If one assumes that teachers are already skilled at working with children, it is difficult to discern other reasons why additional abilities might be required.

Other important considerations also enter into the mechanics of implementing sex education programs. Not the least of these is financial support. The impact of any curriculum must at some point be dealt with in a cost-effective manner. Books and supplies must be procured and teachers paid on a continuing basis for the effort to develop.

Two important financial questions surround sex education at the local level. One is continuity of enrollment. Since districts operate to serve students, the continuation of courses often hinges on numbers of students which enroll. Enrollments eventually translate into state and local dollars,

which are used for upkeep and further development. In most areas, sex education has been an optional program of study. Because of the sensitive and controversial nature of its content, enrollments may vary widely from year to year. Populations in other courses have also changed, yet these alterations, which hinge on employment trends or academic interests, are often predictable. The volatile nature of sex education enrollments can make these courses difficult to budget on a continuing basis.[20]

A related financial concern is the public and legal context of the support of sex education. Events have demonstrated that many citizens who vehemently oppose these curricula also object to supporting them with their tax dollars. This pattern seems unique to sex education programs. Parents who do not wish their children enrolled in home economics or chemistry, for instance, still believe in maintaining such courses. The concern with sex education goes deeper, however, and many of those who oppose it refuse to finance it for benefit of others. This trend bears threatening implications for the public schools. Recent years have seen an increasing number of school budget defeats. In 1978, for example, over 30% proposed budget referenda, in New York State, were defeated in their first presentation to the voters. The so-called "taxpayers revolt" has increased the intensity of this pattern. Under these circumstances, the merits of sex education curricula must be balanced against their possible financial impact on the total educational program. This should not imply that the phantom of public discontent should deter worthwhile instructional efforts. It should suggest, however, that the value of existing general programs, as well as that of sex education, be balanced against possible negative impacts.[21]

Another major educational consideration is evaluation. Evaluation must take place within the school system. Curricula must be structured to

stimulate student awareness of progress as well as examination by teachers. Evaluation must identify program weaknesses and suggest modifications.

The importance of external evaluation has also increased. Accountability has become a major movement in American education during recent years. The public increasingly demands results for its dollars. These requirements may be especially strong in the area of sex education. Supporters of such programs have been vocal in their emphasis on rises in the numbers of teenage pregnancies and cases of venereal disease. Supposedly, many of these difficulties have resulted from a lack of knowledge about sex among young people.[22] Accordingly, sex education is presumed to promote declines in these trends.

The relationship between sex education and evaluation has been an uneven one. The effectiveness of internal evaluation varies with the degree to which curricula are structured. Testing can often measure the amount of material which students absorb. Yet, this touches only one aspect of the subject. Supporters claim that sex education will not only increase awareness, but stimulate behavior as well. Existing educational testing is not oriented toward stimulating behavior, however. The teaching of literature, for example, is designed to promote awareness, rather than structure social habits.

Demographic evidence supports this conclusion. No major study has established a linkage between the introduction of sex education and decreases in the numbers of teenage pregnancies or cases of venereal disease. In Scandinavian countries, the introduction of sex education has paralleled increases in the spread of syphillis and gonorrhea.[23] A host of possible implications may be drawn from this fact. It might be concluded that sex curricula have not been sufficiently developed to influence individual patterns of action. It may be determined that the impact which has occurred

has been too small to be measured. It might also be reasoned that the public schools are the wrong avenue for the development of moral or behavioral precepts. Whatever the case, the question of evaluation must ultimately be faced. No sex education program will be able to exist indefinitely unless it can produce results.

The implementation of sex education must thus consider such mechanical aspects of education as definition, curriculum, staffing, finance, and evaluation. When the rhetoric about the reasons for such a curriculum subsides, each local school board will be left to deal with these very basic considerations. As is always the case, the decision will involve a balancing of alternatives. Benefits of implementing a curriculum will have to be weighed against problems of content, people, and money.

Analysis of the mechanics of public education lends important insights concerning sex education curricula. While most of these concern the workability of courses, some relate to the theoretical core of the sex education debate. Understanding of these points, within the context of public education, promotes a better grasp of the ethereal, as well as the practical points involved.

The Perspective

One of the most crucial issues in the sex education debate has been morality. Opponents have claimed that the teaching of sex inevitably entails the teaching of morality. Many of the sex instruction supports assert that it can be taught without moral overtures.

The entire morality question rapidly becomes an intellectual quagmire. Supporters of sex education, who profess to be free of morality, justify their program because it will curtail such 'undesirable' developments as

teenage pregnancies and veneral disease. Yet, if sex education is to help head off such patterns, it must carry with it some sort of moral overtones. If it does not carry these implications, it becomes an orientation to various types of sexual activity.[24]

The issue of sensitivity is a related concern. In arguing that sex education can be divorced from morality, supporters of these curricula imply that they can be implemented in a clinical manner, without arousing the emotions. Yet, researchers have proven that this is not the case. They have demonstrated that communication regarding sex and the arousal of emotions are directly related. If the material is to be conveyed, the feelings will be present.[25]

Consideration of the mechanical aspects of implementing sex education helps clarify a number of aspects of the morality issue. There can be no teaching of sex without moral overtones. If moral values are not emphasized, the program becomes a survey of sexual activity which suggests permissiveness. All of this leaves the supporters of sex curricula in curious circumstances. Many of these individuals argue that sex could be presented without reference to values. At the same time, however, they present their program as an answer to a number of societal, and, by implication, moral problems.[26] These individuals do not realize that the assumptions which form the basis of a program, whether religious or utilitarian in origin, are still values.

Like morality, human sensitivity also appears inextricably connected with sex education. The feelings of students, teachers, and the general public will always be present. Many authorities have dismissed opposition to sex curricula in terms of emotionalism.[27] These individuals overlook the content of the adversary position, yet they also freely dismiss feelings

as void of substance. It must be understood that emotions move people. In many instances, they have proven more influential than facts.

Beyond morality and sensitivity, reexamination of the factors surrounding sex education has also shed light on the general methodology of sex education. As the foregoing discussion has established, sex curricula have grown out of concern for societal problems and determination to change these conditions. The motivation for the program is thus a remedial one, oriented toward the eradication of a particular problem, rather than the development of a general area of knowledge.

There is nothing new about the development of educational programs to correct societal deficiencies. The massive expenditures which were stimulated by the Soviet launch of Sputnik I, in 1957, were planned to close a supposed technological gap. The present effort to eradicate cancer and other diseases has its roots in the medical schools of America. What differentiates these efforts from the sex education movement, however, is the nature of the cause-effect relationships involved. There can be little question that technological progress hinges on the amount of technical research undertaken, or that medical achievements are tied to the breadth of academic progress in this area. Yet, the existence of a connection between sex education and reduced venereal disease or teenage pregnancies has not been established. It is not even a case of waiting for the final data. The groundwork of research in this country has not been initiated. If the Scandanavian experience with sex education is any guide, more information may actually be paralleled by greater incidence of such difficulties as venereal disease and unwanted pregnancy.[28] In this situation, it might be proper to identify the cause of the problem before implementing the supposed solution. If the emphasis is to be a mechanical one, the importance

of proving casual connections must be paramount.

Considerations of morality, sensitivity, and causation suggest a general sort of perspective regarding sex education. As a composite of evidence from a variety of sources, this view may offer insights concerning the present state of the art in this area.

From a mechanical position, it is evident that sex education curricula and staffing patterns have not evolved to the point where they are easily implemented in public school environments. Many programs are based on vague or nonexistent assumptions. Support structures at the university level are equally lacking. The result has been a bewildering range of curricula, few of which seem to treat the entire subject. The teacher training situation raises even more questions. Not only are professional programs few in number, but the ones which do exist are often subdivisions of other disciplines. Beyond this, the combination of personal qualities requried seems to be especially demanding. It remains to be seen how district staff recruiters might be able to identify these capacities.

Whatever the worth of the arguments supporting sex education, the existing curricula may not be ready for the schools. Time for research and development would doubtlessly produce a better product than the hasty efforts currently being undertaken. The eventual payoff from polished, efficient programs could easily offset the additional effort involved.

A general perspective also indicates that if sex education may not be ready for the schools, public education is clearly not ready for sex education. From the standpoint of curriculum, the advent of such as massive interdisciplinary program would seriously disrupt existing offerings. It would literally rip core components out of a number of programs. The whole idea of interdisciplinary education, when placed in the center of the

curriculum, opposes the academic disciplines as they now exist. In traditional liberal arts and science education, the student enrolled in a variety of courses and thus gained wide consciousness through exposure to a number of intellectual approaches. The interdisciplinary method assumes that the individual is not capable of this, and must have his materials pre-packaged.

The legal implications of teaching sex education in the schools might also be considered. The federal constitution left the management of education to the states, but the Supreme Court has demonstrated a proclivity for involvement in a number of school concerns. By eliminating the use of school prayers, the Court has squarely come out on the side of separating morality and education. In other cases, state Courts have made it clear that schools and colleges, like businesses and governments, will be held accountable for their actions.

Beyond the courts lies the influence of the public. Popular attitudes toward education have not exactly been overwhelmingly favorable in recent years. Declining enrollments have forced many districts into stringent budgets and school closings. Under these conditions, it might be wise to consider the wisdom of placing additional burdens on the educational brow. This is not a time where the luxury of wholesale experimentation is allowable.[29] Programs which are implemented must be effective, efficient, and workable.

A final perspective, an historical one, sheds light on the full range of considerations involved. Sex education is no more an isolated development than any other curriculum. Other innovative efforts have preceded it and still more will doubtlessly follow.,

In an historical context, sex education appears to be one of a number of programs of study oriented toward the solution of social problems. Like

the civil rights movement, it represents the use of schools to reform defects in the larger society. Like the efforts to place religion within the public school curriculum, it assumes that values can be inculcated in the classroom and that information itself will be enough to stimulate human action.[30]

The appropriateness and the record of efforts such as these are well-known. The intervention of civil rights in the classroom has not produced fundamental changes in attitude. In many instances, it has exacerbated problems which already exist. At the same time, it has hamstrung school districts with regulations which impair their instructional mission.[31] Neither has instruction in moral values produced specific patterns of action. Most parochial schools have curricula which emphasize moral values, yet no proof exists that these institutions produce better human products than do the public schools.

The impact of this information should not be earthshaking. The public schools, like every other institution, have limited capabilities. They cannot be expected to do everything. If excessive burdens are piled on them, they will surely fail in their primary instructional mission.

If the schools are not the proper place for sex education, what is the most suitable environment? A common answer should be the family ties which have traditionally provided the basis for the development of American values. Indeed, excessive fixation on the idea of institutional solutions may cause neglect of this most fundamental of all organizations. Unlike the schools, the family has no regulated curriculum and no evaluation program, yet this is because a pluralistic society places ultimate responsibility on the individual. Beyond the family like a host of churches and other groups.[33] The nation's development has been permeated by a belief

that government cannot do everything. Independent effort, not government, settled the West. Private ingenuity produced most of history's mechanical interventions.

Sex has traditionally been an individual matter in this nation. There is no reason why the worldwide pattern of massive government intervention in private life should institutionalize this concern. Government, even at the school district level, is simply not equipped to deal with every subject or to solve every problem. The reassertion of the family and private organizations in this connection is not merely an option, it is a necessity.

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